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Political capabilities for democratisation in Uganda: good governance or popular organisation building?

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Opinion is divided about the capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) to enhance the political capabilities of disadvantaged groups in neo-patrimonial contexts, and particularly through a hegemonic paradigm which seeks to advance poverty reduction through good governance. Drawing on a qualitative study of CSOs in western Uganda, this paper argues that strategies focused on increasing the participation of rural citizens in formal decentralised planning spaces may be less effective in enhancing their political capabilities than those facilitating social mobilisation through the formation of producer groups and federations. This has important implications for thinking and practice around popular empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: civil society; empowerment; capabilities; good governance; cooperatives; sub-Saharan Africa

Development thinking is in paradigmatic transition. The previously hegemonic framing of development as ‘poverty reduction through good governance’ and of NGOs as agents of democratisation is now in question. Within this vision NGOs were credited with fostering a pluralist civil society, representing the poor in poverty reduction policy-making processes, and providing services in support of more inclusive social and economic development.¹ Cautious optimists argue that the good governance agenda has resulted in an expansion of the public sphere.² Structuralist critics suggest this participatory agenda has failed to tackle the disadvantageous power relations inherent in a capitalist system and served therefore only to legitimise a status quo that de-politicises development and perpetuates inequality.³ As Hickey suggests, ‘the problem remains one of how to link a politics of recognition with a politics of social justice and economic transformation in meaningful ways’.⁴ In the Ugandan context, the intertwining of political and

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economic power within a neo-patrimonial system and the absence of significant levels of popular pressure for redistributive change compounds this challenge.

This paper examines the potential for civil society to promote socioeconomic and political advancement among disadvantaged groups in sub-Saharan Africa by exploring the empowerment strategies of two Ugandan civil society organisations (CSOs). Popular organisation around livelihood concerns emerges here as a more effective approach to enhancing the political influence of smallholder farmers than strategies aimed solely at promoting citizen participation within local government planning spaces; the latter fail to tackle the power relations that perpetuate both underdevelopment and ineffective governance. Within a capitalist system characterised by neo-patrimonial politics, promoting economic as well as socio-political empowerment is required in order to reshape power relations and gain political influence for marginal groups.

The paper begins with a review of the roles afforded NGOs under the good governance agenda, followed by an introduction to the Ugandan context. The next section presents the research methodology, including Williams' political capabilities framework as an analytical lens suited to the study of strategies for popular empowerment.⁵ The two case study organisations are then discussed in terms of their organisational strategies, and of the political-economic and strategic dynamics that have shaped their outcomes. A concluding section draws together lessons for thinking and practice.

NGOs: agents of good governance?

A more inclusive phase of neoliberalism emerged under the Post-Washington Consensus, within which the terms 'civil society' and 'NGO' have become increasingly conflated.⁶ This has taken the form of the poverty reduction agenda, tied into social protection policies, participatory poverty analysis and policy-making processes; and the good governance agenda, focused on building democratic, decentralised governments, capable of responding to active, empowered citizens supported by CSOs.⁷

The links between good governance and poverty reduction in the world's least developed countries are increasingly being called into question,⁸ as is the ascendancy of NGOs as critical agents of development and democratisation in such contexts.⁹ A now well-established de-politicisation critique highlights the absence of power and conflict analysis within professionalised approaches to participatory development and governance.¹⁰ Politicised analysis of governance in sub-Saharan Africa draws attention to the futility of participatory governance agendas within neo-patrimonial systems lacking in the kinds of social, political and managerial interest, incentive and sanctions systems that have underpinned citizen agency and state responsiveness elsewhere.¹¹

NGOs are increasingly implored to 'return to their roots' by supporting disadvantaged groups to reject the de-politicised participatory spaces promoted within an inclusive liberal paradigm and claim their own spaces which allow for the participation of previously marginalised actors on more equal terms.¹² A range of NGO strategies has been advocated to this end, including 'popular organisation building' and cultivating receptivity to popular representation and the sharing of decision-making power among political-economic power

holders;¹³ fostering coalitions between disadvantaged groups, social movements, and political society;¹⁴ and securing access to information that can advance the interests of the marginalised.¹⁵

Popular organisation building in agrarian contexts

In agrarian contexts popular organisation building necessitates engagement with farmers and their associations, but studies of sub-Saharan African groups since the 1990s have focused predominantly on questions of economic impact and sustainability rather than politics. Beyond Africa, research has credited such groups with catalysing socioeconomic mobility in support of increased participation in community and political life; developing skills and confidence in leading, negotiation and compromise which can spill over into the public sphere; and building the collective power necessary to shape the behaviour of state, market and political actors.¹⁶ Recent synthesis studies suggest that overall NGOs have had a negative impact on rural associations by creating dependency on their financial and technical support; diverting activist energy into meeting bureaucratic requirements; and undermining solidarity by attracting members with more suitable capabilities for participation in NGO programmes.¹⁷

The politics of representation in Museveni's Uganda

Since coming to power via civil war in 1986, President Museveni has secured relative stability and an impressive degree of poverty reduction, from 56% per cent in 1992–3 to 24.5% in 2012–13.¹⁸ Museveni initially governed through a 'no party' system under which all Ugandan citizens were made members of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) that secured his rule. The no party system combined representative politics with popular participation through a combination of merit-based parliamentary democracy and decentralised popular representation.¹⁹ This laid the foundations for the current five-tier local government system and bottom-up development planning process that begins with village-level priority setting. Village plans are passed up and amalgamated through the parish and sub-county councils to the district as the highest level of local government. All adult members of a village are members of the village council; village, sub-county and district chairpersons are elected by universal suffrage. In 2005 the NRM reintroduced a multiparty system.

Despite these reforms, the Museveni regime has become increasingly authoritarian. Opposition is frequently met with either co-optation or repression, the NRM continuously channels vast public resources into election campaigns and military expenditure, and regime survival has increasingly been pursued through neo-patrimonialism fuelled by corruption.²⁰ Recent national statistics reveal that close to 43% of Ugandans are at risk of falling back into poverty if faced with a shock, around one in 10 people remain in chronic poverty, and average land holdings are continually decreasing.²¹

Despite extensive administrative decentralisation, resource allocation has remained highly centralised, undermining institutional channels for popular participation. Repeated ethnic conflict and intense population pressure on land has

also exacerbated the social breakdown and mistrust that characterised the tumultuous postcolonial era. Women have little time for associational participation and rarely have control over household income or decision making. Although there has been resurgence in the cooperative sector, many farmers remain averse to cooperative production because of a history of enforced production for state-run monopolies under the British Protectorate, mismanagement of this same model of cooperation in the postcolonial period and the challenge of competing in global markets under 1990s liberalisation.

These conditions, combined with a neo-patrimonial system, have left many low-income rural dwellers unwilling to engage in local governance or to challenge social superiors,²² creating a largely unfavourable context for NGOs seeking to promote empowerment among marginalised rural citizens.

Methodological and conceptual approach

The research that this paper is derived from focused on the extent to which NGOs can cultivate supportive conditions for democratic development in Uganda's Rwenzori sub-region and was conducted between 2009 and 2011. Rwenzori is an under-researched area of the country and has a history of repeated ethnic conflict, with a legacy that continues to shape political, social and economic relations today.²³ It has also been an NRM stronghold since Museveni first took power, with strong links to central government. It therefore presented interesting dynamics for a study focused on the interactions between civil society strategies and the influence of rural citizens over decision making and resources, and the political-economic dynamics shaping the outcomes achieved.

The two case study organisations were identified through a snowballing strategy following initial meetings with civil society activists in the region, who suggested that both these organisations had achieved some success in reshaping both political and socioeconomic power relations. The first case study is of a professionalised non-membership research and development NGO (henceforth RD). Data generation with this organisation included a review of internal documentation, 40 semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs), 123 semi-structured interviews with a range of state, civil society and political actors at multiple levels of organisational operation, and semi-structured observation of organisational practice. The second case is a community-led microfinance cooperative (henceforth BJC), with whom data generation involved 16 semi-structured interviews with staff, volunteers, board members and former members, local councillors and civil servants and a donor representative; five FGDs with their training team and member groups (including both men and women); and semi-structured observation of member group meetings and an Annual General Meeting (AGM).

Data reliability and validity was built upon the triangulation of data from interviews, FGDs and observations from the breadth of actors described above, and evaluation of weight, quality, theoretical significance and the presence or absence of conflicting cases.²⁴

Political capabilities analysis

Williams' political capabilities framework offers a useful means of capturing the political empowerment outcomes of participatory development initiatives.²⁵

It seeks to capture the longer term shifts in state–citizen relations that can lay the foundations for future moments of empowerment and change. Williams advocates a focus on three questions with corresponding analytical dimensions: to what extent does development practice (1) result in political learning; (2) reshape political networks; and (3) affect patterns of representation?²⁶ Building on Williams' own description of these dimensions, this research examined whether participants had accumulated knowledge about formal political rights, the informal 'rules of the game' and, associated with these, a deeper consciousness about the operations of power and awareness of alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Political networks are the web of social relations through which citizens or particular social groups seek to advance their interests, including through relationships with brokers and patrons as well as official representatives. Alterations in patterns of representation might have included a softening or hardening of repressive or exclusionary political norms; changes in the ways in which political claims were being expressed or given voice; changes to the ways in which local cultures of leadership or governance were viewed, valued and responded to; and the extent to which alternative forms of governance were being imagined and discussed.

A research and development NGO (RD)

RD started out as a non-membership research institute in 1996 and by 2010 was operating with an international donor-funded budget of £702,000 sterling and a staff team of 28 graduates. Leaders drifted away from research towards the implementation of donor-driven development projects in the early 2000s, but this initial orientation instilled an emphasis on participatory action learning, which early staff were trained in by a British consultant in 2002. RD's use of participatory methodology has been significantly shaped by donor requirements, meaning a move away from facilitating conscientisation about power relations towards a focus on information provision about human rights and formal governance processes and policies. RD has multiple programme areas which attempt to promote positive change at a range of levels, from micro-enterprise development with the chronic poor to the facilitation of annual regional leadership retreats focused on easing ethnic tensions and promoting reflection about regional development. The organisation seeks to promote socioeconomic and political empowerment by working within the existing system rather than imagining systemic change. It attempts to improve market access for farmers, for example, but doesn't engage in campaigns for land reform.

The two RD initiatives explored here are delivered in partnership by staff members and a team of Community Process Facilitators (CPFs) – locally embedded activists who operate at sub-county level and receive daily allowances. RD's rights and governance programme seeks to increase citizen influence over resource allocation and collective action for the improved use and maintenance of local resources. It focuses partly on enhancing village and parish development planning processes and partly on improving the performance of participatory governance mechanisms in the primary health and education sectors. The discussion here focuses on the former between 2006, when RD first began engaging communities over rights and governance in this targeted way,

and 2011, when fieldwork took place. During this period RD staff trained and supported CPFs to carry out awareness-raising sessions with village residents during village meetings, training sessions with local councillors, and review meetings at both village and parish level to follow up on earlier discussions and training. These sessions focus on the roles and responsibilities of citizen, state and political actors within a range of national policies, including those pertaining to decentralised government and access to information.

RD's overarching objective in its work with farmers has been fostering socioeconomic empowerment (particularly among women) by increasing household income through savings and credit and sustainable production. RD began by providing grants and training to smallholder groups, raising awareness about the importance of household and collective savings, and training up 'model farmers' (farmers with successful enterprises) to act as trainers of small farmer groups in their own communities. Some of these model farmers also became CPFs. As farmers progressed, staff and CPFs supported them to federate into associations for collective storage and marketing of their produce and for micro-finance. By 2007, RD recognised that the chronic poor had been excluded from their interventions and developed a micro-enterprise project targeting this social group. By this time RD also recognised that its grant-giving was contributing to an emergent culture of dependency among farming communities in the region. Since then, RD has focused increasingly on providing training, organisational development and technical support rather than on giving out money. By 2011 RD estimated that it had worked with over 500 farmer groups across the region.

Fostering good governance

RD's rights and governance initiative has generated limited outcomes for the political capabilities of participants. A critical role for village councillors is to hold bi-monthly village meetings in order to engage residents in development planning and the governance of shared resources. Only five of the 14 villages I engaged with during the research were holding these meetings and this was also the case before RD began its training. In each of those five villages, however, I engaged with a councillor or chairperson who had experienced political learning in response to RD's training in terms of having increased understanding about their constitutional roles and skills for monitoring resources and facilitating meetings. Two village chairpersons had specifically used resource monitoring worksheets provided by the CPFs and were now attempting to engage residents in planning about local resources in response to this information.

There was no substantive evidence of political learning having taken place among other village residents. Chairpersons were not enforcing decisions made during meetings and villagers lacked a sense of responsibility for putting agreed action into practice. In one observed meeting an agreement had been made that each household should contribute 1000 shillings towards maintenance of a water source,²⁷ but the village executive had only managed to collect 10,000 shillings since the last meeting two months before. During another observation high numbers of school drop-outs were discussed but no action was planned in response. Where meetings were taking place, increased participation by women in particular was linked by councillors and women themselves to increased

awareness that ‘you can learn things from meetings’ gained from their participation within savings and producer groups. Village residents framed their role in meetings as receiving information rather than planning collective maintenance work or discussing local resource priorities.

There was no suggestion of reshaped political networks or patterns of representation in response to this initiative. Village chairpersons and local residents were unable to say during interviews whether or not their priorities had made it into higher-level development plans, partly because there had been no feedback process and partly because the information hadn’t been sought out. Neither was inclusion in a development plan a guarantee that priorities would be implemented – one village chair explained that a gravity water system requested by their executive committee had been sitting in the sub-county development plan for five years.

Interviews with one of the CPFs and with relevant local leaders and residents did reveal that RD had catalysed collective action in one hillside village. In 2007 the CPF worked in partnership with a local activist resident in the village who was already linked to RD through membership of a lowland farmer association. Populated by Bakonjo, an ethnic group that until 2006 was entirely unrepresented at district level, the community had suffered both ethnic and geographical marginalisation from state services. Children had to walk down ungraded mountain footpaths each day to lowland schools, where classes were taught in a different local language. The CPF and resident activist facilitated a series of meetings resulting in plans for a village primary school and the construction of an access road from the lowlands. With no response from the sub-county government, the activist used contacts he had developed through his farmer group to mobilise funding for temporary classrooms, and parents contributed labour, materials or money. Over time villagers were able to generate financial support from an international NGO for more permanent structures. Villagers also constructed the road manually, making it easier to access the village on foot but still inaccessible for vehicles. More recently the community has stopped maintaining the road, having ‘lost interest’ and seeing no response from the local government, whom they had hoped might meet them half way by grading the road. Village meetings have also ceased. Local councillors suggest residents see little point in raising their interests when the local government is either unable or unwilling to respond to their needs.

Political learning had clearly taken place among these villagers but the result has been an abandonment of the formal planning system. Although the local activist had accumulated new relationships for advancing the community’s interests – had expanded his political networks in Williams’ terms – he achieved this through membership of a local association that received support from RD rather than through the latter’s rights and governance initiative.

Popular organisation building

Research with farmer groups and associations focused predominantly (but not exclusively) on RD’s partnership work with a sustainable production organisation (SP) that it had helped to set up in the early 2000s in a remote rural sub-county. RD staff and local leaders explained that SP began life as a small group of farmer trainers who in the absence of support from the state or NGOs,

wanted to work collectively for local economic development. RD supported these leaders to form a producer cooperative, providing organisational development advice and grants for crop trials. In 2004 SP (by now a registered NGO, though still run by local farmers) had developed an upland rice initiative with RD's support, which has led to the establishment of a successful rice marketing association with 40 group and 120 individual members, a store and a huller house. RD has also brokered links between SP and international donor agencies. RD's capacity-building work with local farmer groups and SP itself has also supported the development of a microfinance association with 17 group members, and an information centre.

Through these initiatives RD has supported a process of political learning alongside socioeconomic development and mobility which has, in turn, reshaped political networks by encouraging group members to take up a variety of leadership positions, and to select and campaign for leaders more likely to represent their interests. Members of the seven RD-supported groups and associations engaged during fieldwork explained that households that are advancing economically come to be seen externally as hard-working and well-informed. Farmers talked about learning to give advice and relate to people, and about gaining confidence in leading and negotiating through their group membership. Together with socioeconomic advancement this gives individual farmers the confidence and motivation to stand and the external support and encouragement for their nomination and election as community and political leaders (within user committees, NRM party structures, or local councils for example). RD's push for the inclusion of women and increased access to information and training among female and male members was also considered by farmers and SP staff to have contributed to incremental shifts in gender roles, such as women selling cash crops at local markets, although measuring changes at a household level was beyond the scope of this research and no household impact studies existed.

Qualitative accounts suggested that group membership and shifting gender roles have created enabling conditions for an increasing number of both men and women to engage in political campaigning and community or political leadership. Between 2009 and 2011 members of RD-supported farmer associations lobbied the chair of their local sustainable production NGO (SP) to stand as a candidate for sub-county chairperson in 2011 so that he could better represent the interests of local farmers. They then successfully mobilised to secure his election. The research identified five further cases of group members encouraging a leader to participate in local councils and, where necessary, campaigning to get them elected.

Discussion: political economy and strategic capacity

In summary, RD has only achieved limited outcomes for the political capabilities of smallholders with its good governance intervention but it has indirectly fostered political learning, and begun to reshape political networks, by providing sustainable production training to smallholder farmers and supporting them to develop marketing and microfinance associations. There is no evidence of changing patterns of representation, however, in terms of incremental changes to the underlying culture of leadership and governance for example.

The local government planning system operates not according to the formal rules of the game but to the dynamics of neo-patrimonial politics. Three civil servants and two local councillors suggested that local government resources are often diverted either into the pockets of local elites or into NRM election campaigns. A sub-county chief and an accountant both explained how the centralised nature of any resources of significance and low levels of taxation left few resources open to local influence. Dysfunctional village governance was also linked to a history of deference to authority following years of political turmoil and violent repression, as well as a culture of deference to social superiors among less educated community members. Residents of one village also felt reluctant to challenge their poorly performing village chairperson because he presides over the village court and land transactions. One local civil servant also suggested that conflict avoidance among poorer residents is reinforced by elite friendships and an associated closing of rank against the interests of socioeconomic subordinates.

As a single organisation dependent on international funding, RD cannot be expected to single-handedly overturn entrenched neo-patrimonial social and political systems. The organisation might, however, be expected to engage in power analysis and attempt to design initiatives in response to realities on the ground. RD has engaged in a basic level of power analysis in its attempts to prioritise the inclusion of women and, latterly, chronically poor individuals within its sustainable production interventions. Findings relating to both the initiatives explored above intimate either a lack of deep-felt commitment to tackling entrenched power relations or an underestimation of the complexity of the challenge among successive donors as well as staff. Triangulation of participant observation and interviews suggests that the European donor behind the rights and governance intervention has not created space for experimentation, or for the kinds of skills development among staff that might increase their capacity to engage with such questions. Staff and CPFs working on both initiatives were inadequately trained in the highly challenging facilitation skills thought necessary for effective long-term participatory action learning processes.²⁸ Motivation is also a factor. Although donors have not provided the space, neither has this lack of engagement with the power relations constraining popular agency and participation been flagged up and pursued by programme staff or senior managers as a major organisational challenge. There is a degree of mismatch between organisational ideals and organisational culture. Staff spend very limited amounts of time at village and household level, and some staff members appeared reluctant to interact with and really understand the experiences and priorities of village residents in remote rural areas. This has also been highlighted in successive evaluations but no action has been taken in response. CPFs operate at sub-county level without a 'train-the-trainer' strategy leading to an absence of locally embedded activists able to implement or follow up on RD's inputs. In the case of community mobilisation for school building in the hillside village, for example, the presence of a locally embedded resource person resulted in better political capabilities outcomes among the other villagers.

In the sub-county where SP is based, geographical marginalisation has also been a driver of self-help. Two of the founding activists recognised that the absence of the state or NGO surrogates at that time meant there was a local

drive for collective action to improve livelihoods. RD has found that a history of ethnic conflict combined with high population pressure on land has undermined drives for economic cooperation in other areas of the region, while areas in close proximity to urban centres where the NGO boom has been most pronounced are characterised by a culture of donor dependency. Donor agendas have also overwritten the lessons of local history. Local self-help groups first emerged on a clan basis but rather than ‘working with the grain’ of local culture and agency, as Booth has recently advocated,²⁹ donors pushed RD towards encouraging different ethnic groups and neighbours within the community to work together. This led to many groups failing, at least in part because of intra-communal ethnic and land tensions.

A community-led microfinance and marketing cooperative

Bukonzo Joint Cooperative Union (BJCU) comprises a membership of small-scale farmers (85% women) who grow organic, hand-picked coffee. It was established in 1999 as an association of 11 savings groups, after the Coordinator graduated from a Uganda Change Agent’s training course in 1991 and returned home to mobilise members of his own clan.³⁰ The membership is now spread across three sub-counties of one district where there is a majority Bakonjo population. Many members of the microfinance association are also members or clients of the coffee marketing association that BJCU members established in 2005 in response to a fluctuating market and exploitative middle-men. By 2010 the microfinance cooperative had a loan disbursement of just under 1.9 billion shillings,³¹ and that year the marketing society collected 300,988 kg of coffee with a market loan value of 1.27 billion shillings.³² By 2011 BJCU had begun exporting coffee to a buyer in London and had 201 registered member groups with, in turn, 3887 individual members. BJCU can now speak of a base of some 5000 local stakeholders, including clients of the marketing association. To put this in context the sub-county where BJCU is based has a population of roughly 24,000.³³ BJCU has only sought donor funding in support of temporary loans to bolster loan capital or co-financing of assets, in pursuit of social inclusion for the extreme poor, or in support of process documentation and international good practice sharing. The membership’s vision is to improve standards of living and enable people to become actively involved in the social, economic and political development of their community, region and country.

The discussion here focuses on organisational strategies rather than programme areas or interventions, because BJCU is ultimately a membership-based social enterprise, not a donor-funded NGO delivering projects. The first strategy to be explored, in terms of the political capabilities outcomes generated, is community mobilisation. BJCU takes a household-to-household, train-the-trainer approach to mobilising local community members into savings groups and cooperatives, and the organisation has therefore been built from the bottom up. There is a small training team who operate at parish level, fulfil a monitoring and documentation function, and link to the staff team and board. Group trainings focus on improved farming methods as well as skills for financial and group leadership and management. Groups have representation on Parish Coordinating Committees and groups in active parishes have associated into Primary

Cooperatives who link into the parish committees and the board. There are robust channels for two-way communication from savings groups up to the board and back down. Board members rotate every two years so that as many members as possible gain experience of leadership.

Since 2004 communication has been managed pictorially through the development, first, of a participatory action learning methodology and, since 2007, of a Gender Action Learning System (GALS), in partnership with the same consultant who trained RD staff in 2002. Oxfam Novib has also supported the evolution of GALS as BJCU's core operational methodology. GALS basically involves the use of pictorial tools to engage people in participatory analysis about the effects of gender relations and wider power relations on household incomes and wider potential community development. The tools are also used to increase competency in the more technical aspects of farming and financial management. Members of the training team explained that introducing a participatory action learning system overcame literacy challenges, but did little to engage with the gender-based barriers to empowerment the majority female membership were facing, linked to a local culture of polygamy, exclusion from land ownership, male control over household finances, domestic violence and alcoholism.

The second set of outcomes discussed below pertains to BJCU's co-financing of local development solutions in order to secure influence within local government. BJCU members have attempted to engage with formal governance by attending village meetings and budget conferences. Politicians and civil servants throughout the local government structure have sometimes attended BJCU's AGMs and BJCU has repeatedly met state agricultural officials at the district and sub-county level to discuss ways in which they could work together. None of these approaches has generated positive outcomes for members. Overall members have learned that the only way to influence local governance and resources is by mobilising the membership to finance political processes, or by circumventing local brokers, patrons and decision-making processes by engaging with international or district-level actors.

Socioeconomic mobility, shifting gender norms and political capabilities

Outcomes from BJCU's participatory training are impressive. Triangulation of observational and interview data with documentary evidence suggests that members understand the principle of savings and the need to account for money, and have improved farming practices which have led to better quality coffee, higher levels of production and therefore increased incomes. Farmers report having a direct market for their produce with a price they can trust, supported by a culture of transparency, so that members (using the pictorial methodology) can understand how money is being accounted for and used. There have been changes in gender roles within a significant proportion of the member households that participated in GALS training between 2007 and 2010, including joint land ownership in some households – a substantial cultural shift in the Ugandan context. A recent internal impact assessment of GALS training, between 2007 and 2010, suggests that out of 291 people sensitised about the benefits of joint land ownership, 61 households now have joint land certificates from their village council and 25 have registered customary joint land agreements. Of 1096

participants in gender action learning about cooperation in the household and ‘in the garden’, men are beginning to take responsibility for a few roles, like collecting firewood in 449 households; and in 366 households men and women are sharing most or all responsibilities.

Processes of political learning were associated with these markers of socio-economic mobility and shifting relations, just as within the previous case study. Members reported gaining increased confidence, skills and knowledge from participation within the cooperative, leading to increased numbers of local farmers (and particularly women in this case) in leadership roles within savings and farmer groups. Long-term participation had reshaped local political networks as members had gone on to take up external leadership positions – one woman went on to become a sub-county councillor by using the skills and confidence she had acquired as a BJCUC trainer for example. Two out of five members of one sub-county land committee were BJCUC members and another member had gained a seat on the sub-county farmers’ forum.

Influencing governance and resource allocation

As indicated above, beyond entering politics BJCUC members have also mobilised to co-finance political processes and local development solutions. In one example members had identified a series of problems affecting their coffee quality and therefore the price they could negotiate from buyers, including theft of ripe beans and farmers mixing poor and high quality beans to bulk up their produce. BJCUC members agreed to finance a series of council meetings, from the village up to the sub-county and district level, which enabled a bylaw to be developed for the sub-county where BJCUC is based, introducing stiff penalties for actions that undermined coffee quality. Although a district councillor claimed to have enacted the bylaw, it was later discovered that the law was never tabled at the council and there are concerns that the money members had raised to finance the district council meeting was stolen. Although this attempt to influence decision making was not ultimately successful, it failed only at the last hurdle, and might have been effective with different individuals involved.

The BJCUC leadership also managed to circumvent a sub-county development plan in which the local government had decided to invest Belgian government funding into a potato-growing project rather than in rural electrification to support coffee processing.³⁴ With the backing of the membership the BJCUC Coordinator negotiated directly with the Belgian government, who sent representatives to look at BJCUC coffee production and marketing work and then asked the sub-county to adjust their plans. The plan was changed and rural electrification went ahead, but not before BJCUC mobilised the membership to finance the political process in support of this change, as well as about 10% of the overall cost of the project that was needed in addition to the Belgian government funding.

The first example suggests that BJCUC members have engaged in political learning and developed an alternative mechanism for advancing their interests in response by financing political and legal processes. This strategy has not, however, overcome an underlying political culture of neo-patrimonialism and corruption. The second suggests that members have learned about the *de facto* rules of the game. Combined with an expansion in political networks beyond the local

level this has enabled them to circumvent the existing process for representation, and to influence resource allocation through an alternative strategy. Although they have not brought about a shift in the culture of governance, they have acquired enough political knowhow, connections and leverage through critical mass, built upon socioeconomic development, to forward a particular programme and set of interests – a new pattern of representation in Williams' terms.

Discussion: political economy and strategic capacity

Political economy has significantly shaped the outcomes BJCUC has been able to achieve in political capabilities terms. The remote location and absence of state and NGO services, combined with widespread poverty, created fertile ground for self-help in response to mobilisation by the Coordinator. This drive has also been rooted in both a long tradition of collective working among the Bakonjo, and a history of ethnically based mobilisation linked to struggles against exploitation by another ethnic group in the postcolonial era following indirect rule under the British.³⁵ The dysfunctional operations of formal local governance and neo-patrimonial politics have left smallholders disadvantaged yet have also created motivation for associational solidarity and the seeking out of alternative channels for the promotion of farmer interests. Longer-term members were also able to benefit from Uganda's 1990s coffee boom, and have continued to build upon this cohesive focus on a viable market.

While incremental changes are taking place in gender relations across Uganda, BJCUC's specific focus on gender relations has catalysed immediate changes in gender roles within many of the member households that have benefited from GALS training, meaning more women are sharing the benefits of increased household income. BJCUC's bottom-up approach to organisation building, amid a context of poverty and marginalisation, has also been effective in generating high levels of commitment to the organisation and its objectives, while creating structures and processes that facilitate both bottom-up representation and the maintenance of autonomy in relation to external agendas. The integration of self- and common interest through their livelihoods focus, combined with consciousness raising about the mutual benefits of cooperation, has built upon multiple sites of common identity, including ethnicity, livelihood and, predominantly, gender. The organisation has also attempted to limit the exclusion of the lowest-income households through targeted cash transfer and capacity-building initiatives. Much of this must be credited to the Coordinator, who has played a leading role in negotiating organisational autonomy, while making use of external advice and funding when necessary, and building robust mechanisms for representation and accountability, generating high levels of trust in the organisation, which have been key to overcoming the negative legacy of the Ugandan cooperative movement. Other staff and volunteers recognise this dependency as a weakness and are trying to learn from the Coordinator's approach.

Viewing civil society strategies through a political capabilities lens

These findings suggest that strategies focused on more effective citizen participation within state governance spaces that operate according to an informal, neo-patrimonial system, rather than formally constituted acts and policies, are

unlikely to gain significant influence over resources for disadvantaged groups in rural Uganda at the current juncture. Participation within savings or producer groups and associations – when a positive mix of enabling factors is present – can take rural communities closer to linking representation with social justice and economic transformation, in Hickey's terms.³⁶ Farmers can learn a range of skills from associational participation which can build their political capabilities for representation in other more formal arenas, while addressing their own livelihood interests. Local-level political representation does not necessarily translate into greater influence over resource allocation for smallholders because of the national character of politics, but it is perhaps a positive step towards more inclusive economic transformation. These findings support arguments in the literature for a greater emphasis on the links between shifts in socioeconomic and political power when seeking to promote more effective forms of governance. The findings also add to a small body of evidence highlighting links between economic association and political capability enhancement,³⁷ and draw further attention to the gap in this literature for sub-Saharan Africa.

The evidence presented here provides further support for the body of literature which suggests that associational solidarity can emerge out of a condition of marginalisation; can effectively be built upon savings-based finance and a federated structure that ensures groups remain a manageable size for the full engagement and participation of members; and is driven forward by robust mechanisms for representation and accountability.³⁸ The findings also suggest that, in contexts like Uganda, 'working with the grain' of existing agency for collective action,³⁹ on the basis of shared identity for example (whether clan, gender or livelihood-based), may be a more effective approach than donor-driven strategies aimed at fostering collaboration among heterogeneous communities on the basis of residence alone.

The findings also provide support for arguments in support of formalised NGOs playing a facilitative role in building transformational associational power and further underline the warnings in the literature about donor-dependency,⁴⁰ and de-politicised engagement within developing country environments.⁴¹ The discussion suggests that formalised NGOs (whether international or indigenous) can support political capabilities development among farmer-led organisations by supporting networking and communication between organisations, donors and skilled activists; focusing on inputs of information, training and advice rather than grant-making; and ensuring that their strategies (and those of the groups they support) are built upon localised power analysis. It also suggests that NGOs and donors can learn much from the experience of community-led organisations like BJCU in identifying positive approaches to supporting progressive change without undermining local political agency.

Williams' framework has enabled a politicised analysis of the approaches employed by these organisations, and of the ways in which these are shaping the capabilities of smallholder farmers over time, which takes the discussion beyond questions of inclusion. The analysis here suggests, however, that Williams' focus on the spaces of interaction between citizens and state actors excludes the critical importance of processes of socioeconomic mobility and – particularly perhaps in an agrarian context – shifting gender norms and relations. This suggests that analytical frameworks seeking to increase knowledge about

how to redistribute societal power may need to engage with the integration between these political economy processes and Williams' existing dimensions of political capabilities. The limitations involved in the attainment of local political representation within a regime increasingly focused on the extension of centralised power also highlights a need for more research into what makes the difference between the ability of farmers to achieve local representation, and their ability to change the culture of how issues can be represented, in what ways and by what kinds of actor.

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Notes

1. Stiglitz, "Towards a New Paradigm."
2. Corbridge, "The (Im)possibility of Development Studies."
3. Harriss et al., "Introduction."
4. Hickey, "The Government of Chronic Poverty," 152.
5. Williams, "Towards a Repoliticisation."
6. Mercer, "NGOs, Civil Society and Democratization."
7. World Bank, *World Development Report 1997*; and World Bank, *World Development Report 2000–2001*.
8. Kwon and Kim, "Poverty Reduction and Good Governance."
9. Hearn, "African NGOs."
10. Harriss et al., "Introduction."
11. Booth, *Development as a Collective Action Problem*.
12. Banks with Hulme, *NGOs*.
13. Törnquist, "Introduction," 21.
14. Corbridge et al., *Seeing the State*; and Mitlin and Bebbington, "Social Movements and Chronic Poverty."
15. Corbridge, "The (Im)possibility of Development Studies."
16. Thorp et al., "When and How Far?," 907–913; White, "Depoliticising Development," 9; and Webster, "Local Organizations."
17. Banks with Hulme, *NGOs*; and Booth, *Development as a Collective Action Problem*.
18. CPRC, *The Second Chronic Poverty Report*.
19. Kasfir, *Uganda*.
20. Ibid.
21. CPRC, *The Second Chronic Poverty Report*.
22. Golooba-Mutebi, "Reassessing Popular Participation."
23. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, provides an account of the Rwenzururu rebellion, for example during which the Bakonjo ethnic group declared their own kingdom independent of the Batoro, who had dominated political and economic life since the British gave them governing power in the region under colonial indirect rule.
24. Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*.
25. Williams, "Towards a Repoliticisation."
26. Ibid., 568.
27. £0.33 sterling. All currency conversions in the paper are based on rates for 1 January 2010.
28. Farrington and Bebbington, *Reluctant Partners?*
29. Booth, *Development as a Collective Action Problem*.

30. The Uganda Change Agent Association provides training for community activists in the facilitation of Frierian conscientisation. See www.ucaa.or.ug.
31. £618,000.
32. £413,000.
33. Based on local government documentation.
34. The suggestion here was that local councillors were intentionally introducing an inappropriate project so that it would fail and they could keep the surplus resources.
35. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*.
36. Hickey, "The Government of Chronic Poverty," 152.
37. For example, Kabeer et al., *NGOs' Strategies*; and Thorp et al., "When and How Far?"
38. Thorp et al., "When and How Far?"; Agarwal, "Rethinking Agricultural Production Collectivities"; and Kabeer et al., *NGOs' Strategies*.
39. Booth, *Development as a Collective Action Problem*, viii.
40. Bano, *Breakdown in Pakistan*; and Igoe, "Scaling up Civil Society."
41. Harriss et al., "Introduction."

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